

BOOK REVIEW

Barrio Dreams: Selected Plays by Silviana Wood

Cordelia E. Barrera

Barrio Dreams: Selected Plays by Silviana Wood. Eds. Norma E. Cantú and Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. Pp. 362. \$ 24.95 (paper).

Barrio Dreams is the first published collection of plays by Silviana Wood, a native of Tucson's Barrio Anita and one of Arizona's foremost teatristas. The collection features an introduction to Latin@ and Chican@ theater and performance by the editors and five plays that represent Wood's oeuvre and encompass the broader scope of Chican@ and Latin@ dramatic traditions.

The collection attests to Wood's range as a playwright, actor, director, and activist.  explodes stereotypes to highlight social and cultural issues via humor, linguistic wordplay, and an emphasis on the use of the physical body on stage. The plays are thematically and stylistically varied and run the gamut of transfronterizo stories. As a whole, the collection blends elements of dramatic theater, surrealism, *Teatropoesía*, and themes of struggle, belonging, and identity found in earlier ensemble groups such as El Teatro Campesino. Within all of the plays, spoken language—English, Spanish, Spanglish, Caló, and even Yaqui—serves as a distinguishing generational feature and a means to contextualize individual agency and class structures.

Peopled with working-class gente like janitors, receptionists, gang wanna-bes, and comadres, the plays interweave modern struggles, allusions, and lessons from traditional culture alongside the mythic past to encapsulate cosmic

dramas that are sometimes tragic and at other times outrageously comic. Each play features a synopsis and technical notes on music and sets, and *Amor de hija* incorporates the experimental device, imágenes. Invariably, Wood's love of the people, language, and culture that shaped her emblazons the pages of *Barrio Dreams*.

The first play in the collection, *Una vez, en un barrio de sueños*, is an entry into the barrio and its inhabitants in three actos. The actos are connected by the theme of unfulfilled dreams and attachments forged between unlikely characters to suggest a continuity of struggle and unity. Within this landscape of sueños, Wood's barrio becomes a palimpsest for the atravesados. The second play, *Amor de Hija*, is a realistic portrayal of four generations of a working-class Arizona family struggling with generational divides and Alzheimer's disease. The final three plays, *A Drunkard's Tale of Melted Wings and Memories*, *Ánhelos por Oaxaca*, and *Yo, Casimiro Flores* involve characters who travel through time and space and visit the afterlife.

Barrio Dreams reflects Wood's transnational story as a Chicana activist, single mother, and non-traditional student who earned her MFA from the University of Arizona late in life. The collection etches a testimonio of resiliency and community immersed in the art and politics of the borderlands. The plays address themes often found in the Carpas, early twentieth-century political satires in the vein of vaudeville performances that blend Spanish and pre-conquest spectacle traditions and were enjoyed by working-class audiences. Wood seamlessly fuses these early traditions with later issues championed by El Movimiento so that the language and settings reflect the cultural and social characteristics of barrio life as well as the broader context of Chican@ and Latin@ theater productions. Peopled throughout the pages of *Barrio Dreams* are characters born and raised in the barrio—gente like Nana

Cuquita, Ramón Jamón, el Militante and la Señora Martínez, and a long line of comedic chismosas. As Wood is a master of cultural worlds and intersecting knowledges, she seamlessly weaves historical and cultural personas like Selena Quintanilla, La Llorona, and the Mexican film actor, Cantinflas into productions that (often audaciously) traverse comic, mythic, and surreal landscapes alongside realistic situations to proffer insight into the ways La Raza live, love, and work in Tucson. On the whole, the plays address issues of social justice, linguistic marginalization, and sexual and class oppressions. Most notably, however, Wood imbues a rebellious, comic sensibility to scenarios of empowerment for women whose voices have historically been silenced by the status quo. In this last regard, Wood's plays reside in a third space of empowerment and oppositional consciousness.

As the editors note in their detailed critical introduction, *Barrio Dreams* is a crucial contribution to the fields of Chican@ and Latin@ scholarship in that it constitutes the first published collection of plays from a regional author outside of the dynamic theater scene in California during and after El Movimiento. The works collected here enfold cosmic dramas that speak to our brightest hopes, deepest fears, and most fervent desires. For these reasons, the collection will be useful to scholars and students—both graduate and undergraduate—of Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, Chican@ and Latin@ Theater, Theater Studies, and lay persons interested in the Borderlands.

